

## Research to Practice

# Aliens in the Music Classroom? Promoting Effective Knowledge Exchange

By Susan O'Neill

There is no shortage of discussion in education today about how dramatically different young people's learning experiences are compared to even a generation ago. Increasingly fast-paced and high-tech lives are associated with fragmented, fluid, diffuse, and noisy music learning experiences. Increased mobility, social networking, mass media, globalization, and multiculturalism have amplified music learners' social connections and their exposure to diverse music practices. Students have instantaneous access to varied music resources, an immeasurable amount of music choices, and an unprecedented amount of autonomy over their own learning decisions. In addition, there is a growing media convergence culture whereby unique combinations of old and new forms of music production and consumption have exploded boundaries surrounding what constitutes traditional musical knowledge.

Green and Bigum (1993) argue that because young people today have grown up in a computer-connected world that has altered their body of knowledge or know-how to such an extent, it is like having "aliens in the classroom". It might also be argued that in the current information era, teachers and researchers can also feel like aliens in the music classroom. This can occur on many levels and it is not always easy to unravel the layers of complexity that are embedded in these layers. Some of these layers may involve technology, personal experience, popular culture or other cultural understandings. There is a sense that our knowledge base

exists in isolation from other knowledge bases and this can alienate students, teachers, and researchers from one another. Efforts to cross or bridge the gap can appear overwhelming and insurmountable at times.

There has been little progress beyond merely describing the changed and changing circumstances that contribute to this so-called "knowledge gap". What we need are research initiatives and pedagogical approaches that can actively and collaboratively address the challenges

**unique combinations of old and new forms of music production and consumption have exploded boundaries surrounding what constitutes traditional musical knowledge**

that are generated by various gaps between our different ways of knowing. We need to maximize learning opportunities across a diverse range of knowledge and find ways to assist students, teachers, and researchers to exchange their knowledge productively in a world where change is the norm and novelty is the status quo (Bigum & Rowan, 2009).

A key condition that exacerbates a sense of "aliens in the music classroom" is one where the exchange of different forms of knowledge or know-how is neither

encouraged nor valued. Instead, learners, teachers, and researchers alike privilege certain forms of knowledge over others. This creates an authoritarian and/or prejudiced approach to knowledge that is deemed different from one's own. And in order for certain forms of knowledge to remain privileged, they must be actively policed. This is achieved through intolerant practices that ignore, thwart, or suppress other knowledge, potential, and possibilities. This inhibits learning opportunities that are capable of fostering the reflection necessary for a critical sense of the value of any musical knowledge – including knowledge that will form part of our undiscovered future musical world.

Increasingly, music learners are encountering uncertainties and contradictions over what constitutes valued and valuable forms of music knowledge in their everyday lives. Different sociopolitical agendas embedded in different music practices obfuscate music learners' worldviews and challenge them in personal and compelling ways. For many young music learners, what constitutes a musician is inextricably linked to famous people in the media and entertainment industry. In a study of 381 adolescents in England, we found that the most valued role models in music were famous musicians from popular culture. Musical aspects (e.g., whether or not he/she played an instrument; pitch accuracy or musical phrasing, etc.) was of little importance in the reasons young people gave for being inspired by their musician role model. This was despite the fact that these students had already experienced at least eight years of compulsory classroom music education in schools.



Instead, it was the role model's dedication, image, and resiliency in the face of adversity that young people valued most (Ivaldi and O'Neill, 2010). These values, as well as the central role that music plays in students' emotional lives, create a particular lens through which knowledge about music is evaluated. Too often, these evaluations are considered at odds with many formal or school music education agendas.

To promote effective knowledge exchange in music education we must study the values that underpin both our research and practice, not just as they are represented in idealized discourses and slogans, but as they live within and among particular learning communities (students, teachers, researchers). What if we simply shift our focus in music education research and practice so that we emphasize musical values more? This would require us to move beyond merely asking the question "what do I know?" or "what should I know?" and engage as well in more reflective thinking about musical values by asking the question "why might this knowledge be important or useful?" Values serve as points for orientation through the diverse knowledge that exists in our world. Values contribute to the way that knowledge is constructed, used, and exchanged both now and in the future. And, of course, values influence all sorts of decisions that individuals make about music learning, such as whether or not they will continue with lifelong music learning, whether or not they will attend concerts and what kind of concerts they will attend, whether or not they will want their own children to learn music, whether or not they will support the arts and music in the schools and communities in which they live.

Values have an odd life cycle, one that transcends the dichotomy between the individual and the social. Values are never born solely within one person, but they can only thrive — or fail to develop — within relationships between individuals. Only through critical reflection and dialogue, can students, practitioners, and researchers create the conditions and circumstances in which they can search together collaboratively for a more effective

**young people today  
have grown up in a  
computer-connected  
world that has altered  
their body of knowledge  
or know-how to such  
an extent, it is like  
having "aliens in the  
classroom"**

musical knowledge exchange. The future world of music education is not something that is fixed and we just have to sit around and wait for its arrival. Students, teachers, and researchers are not passive recipients but active constructors of the future knowledge base of music education. This is important to recognize because it means that what counts as knowledge or know-how in the music classroom is always evolving. This creates new and exciting opportunities but at the same time it creates barriers or constraints that are particularly difficult to overcome when knowledge exchange is non-existent or ineffective. Too often the responsibility for adjusting to these challenging or even alienating situations rests on the shoulders of individuals. We often exacerbate problems by denying their reality instead of seeking a vision for a collaborative, inquiry-based or problem-solving approach that is capable of fostering effective knowledge exchange in our music education research and practice.

How can we promote effective knowledge exchange? Knowledge exchange is a concept that has developed primarily outside of mainstream education by the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation (CHSRF). The CHSRF has developed a set of principles, models and guidelines for promoting knowledge exchange in Canada's healthcare system. They adopted the term *knowledge exchange* to address some of the concerns about the term *knowledge transfer*. According to the CHSRF, knowledge exchange is about "collaborative problem-solving between researchers and

decision makers that happens through linkage and exchange. Effective knowledge exchange involves interaction between decision makers and researchers and results in mutual learning through the process of planning, producing, disseminating, and applying existing or new research in decision-making." Canadian Health Services Research Foundation ([http://www.chsrf.org/keys/glossary\\_e.php](http://www.chsrf.org/keys/glossary_e.php)).

A key assumption behind knowledge exchange is that students, practitioners, and researchers are often separate groups with distinct cultures and perspectives on knowledge. The idea that neither researchers nor practitioners may fully appreciate the other's world has been referred to as the "two-communities theory" (Wingens, 1990). Knowledge exchange involves bringing together researchers and practitioners (and I would add students here as well) and facilitating their interaction. It begins with collaborating on determining the research question and continues through the entire research process that includes applying the knowledge that emerges through this collaborative process. This ongoing exchange and knowledge transfer ensures that the knowledge generated



*Musicare Inc.*

**Band Instrument  
Specialists**

**Repairs, Rentals, Sales, Leasing**

**Ultrasonic Instrument Cleaning**

**Tel: 613-822-0601**

**Toll Free: 800-361-3323**

**sales@musicare.com E-mail  
www.musicare.com Web**

4534 Anderson Road  
Carlsbad Springs (Ottawa), ON  
K0A 1K0, Canada



## recurring motifs

research to practice

is relevant and applicable to practitioners (and students) as well as useful to researchers. Graham *et al.* (2006) describe this knowledge to action process as, "a cycle leading to implementation or application of knowledge" (p. 20). The process is considered to be complex and challenging as well as iterative and organic.

An interesting component of the CHSRF's knowledge exchange action cycle is the inclusion of a "barriers assessment phase". During this phase, "those wanting to bring about change (implementers or change agents) should assess for potential barriers that may impede or limit uptake of the knowledge so that these barriers may be targeted and hopefully overcome or diminished by intervention strategies. The barriers assessment should also identify supports or facilitators that can be taken advantage of" (p. 20). Knowledge from research and personal experience can be used to identify potential barriers to knowledge use and implementation strategies. The goal at each stage of the research is not only to help develop the trustworthiness

**A key assumption behind knowledge exchange is that students, practitioners, and researchers are often separate groups with distinct cultures and perspectives on knowledge.**

of the research, but also to strengthen the likelihood of more effective uptake of the knowledge that is generated.

Also of interest in the CHSRF's knowledge exchange program is the concept of knowledge brokering. Knowledge brokering is about bringing people together, such as students, teachers, researchers, or policy makers – to facilitate their interaction and build relationships. The goal is to better understand each other's knowledge base or know-how, regardless of whether it is based on formal or informal learning.

Knowledge brokering also helps individuals communicate and understand each other's knowledge and abilities, as well as sustain and maintain effective knowledge exchanges. It helps them to navigate through available knowledge and sources of research, and helps decision makers establish their priorities. It also helps students, teachers, and researchers identify emerging issues that research could help address. Finally, it helps create a network of knowers with shared or common interests.

Although the practice of knowledge brokering and knowledge exchange is not new, increased efforts to recognize, organize, and evaluate its effectiveness within the field of music education research and practice is an intriguing one that seems worthy of our attention. If we can succeed in promoting effective knowledge exchange, then learners, practitioners, and researchers will feel less like "aliens in the classroom" and more empowered to reach their full potential. CME

### References

- Bigum, C., & Rowan, L. (2009). Renegotiating knowledge relationships in schools. In S. E. Noeffke & B. Somekh (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of educational action research* (pp. 131-141). London: Sage Publications.
- Graham, I. D., Logan, J., Harrison, M. B., Straus, S. E., Tetroe, J., Caswell, W., Robinson, N. (2006). Lost in knowledge translation: Time for a map? *Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions*, 26(1), 13-24.
- Green, B., & Bigum, C. (1993). Aliens in the classroom. *Australian Journal of Education*, 37 (2), 119-141.
- Ivaldi, A., & O'Neill, S. A. (2010). Adolescents' attainability and aspiration beliefs for famous musician role models. *Music Education Research*, 12(2), 179-197.
- Wingens, M. (1990). Toward a general utilization theory: A system theory reformulation of the two-communities metaphor. *Knowledge*, 27-42.



Susan O'Neill began her interdisciplinary research career in England where she was Associate Director of the Research Unit for the Study of Musical Skill and Development at Keele University. Her background includes graduate degrees in music performance, education, and psychology. She is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University and Director of Research for Youth, Music and Education (RYME). Her current research focuses on the way young people value music making and the impact of youth music engagement on motivation, well-being, identity, and cultural understanding. You can contact her by email at [sao@sfu.ca](mailto:sao@sfu.ca) or visit [www.rymeyouth.com](http://www.rymeyouth.com)

## STENTOR STUDENT II VIOLIN OUTFIT

Winner of the Music Industries Association  
(MIA) award for Best Bowed Instrument  
more than 20 times.

The MIA is the UK trade association of the musical products industry.



Call for the location of a retailer near you  
1-800-690-0515

**COUNTERPOINT**  
Musical Services

Copyright of Canadian Music Educator / Musicien Educateur au Canada is the property of Canadian Music Educators' Association / L'association canadienne des musiciens éducateurs and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.